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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship of students' sense of belonging in their classes to measures related to motivation, student effort, and academic achievement. Data from 612 fifth- through eighth-grade middle school students revealed that the sense of belonging in a class was related to: (1) students' expectations of academic success; (2) students' intrinsic interest in the schoolwork in the particular subject; (3) course grades; and (4) teacher ratings of students' effort. In general, the sense of belonging was most important among seventh graders, and was more important in low-consensus classes, such as social studies, than in high-consensus classes. Belonging is seen as situation-specific and as amenable to change through group processes in the classroom. A list of 32 references is included. (BC)

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THE SENSE OF BELONGING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO ACADEMIC MOTIVATION AMONG PRE- AND EARLY ADOLESCENT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship of sense of belonging or psychological membership in classes to motivation-related measures, student effort, and academic achievement. The construct of belonging is differentiated from related concepts of class climate, social competence, sociometric status, and social support. Data from 612 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade middle school students revealed that sense of belonging in a specific academic class - of being liked, accepted, and respected by fellow students and the teacher of the class - was significantly related to expectations of academic success, to the intrinsic interest and importance attributed to schoolwork in that subject, and to subsequent course grades and teacher-rated effort. In general, belonging appeared to be most important among 7th grade early adolescents, and was also more important in low-consensus academic classes (such as social studies) than in high-consensus subjects. Belonging is seen as situation-specific and as amenable to change through group processes in the classroom.

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The study of motivation as it applies to academic performance in schools has seen great shifts in emphasis in the past decades, from largely trait-based notions of motivation to more behavioral discussions of external reinforcement contingencies to the current predominant focus on cognitive dimensions of motivation. While great progress has been made in disagregating motivation-related attitudes and thoughts, contextual influences on academic motivation have been largely ignored. In particular, until just the past year or two, academic motives have been studied primarily outside of the context in which they naturally occur, that is, outside of schools and classes. The present study investigates the role of one context-specific attitude, the sense of belonging, and its association with motivation-related beliefs and to academic outcomes. It does so in a social context, middle school classes, and with a study population, pre- and early adolescent students, for whom belonging is likely to be particularly important.

Whatever the official purposes and activities of school classes, they also inevitably include an "interpersonal underworld" (Schutz, 1966) of emotion-laden personal and social relationships that can either facilitate or hinder the stated educational goals of the classroom. At least one key theory of motivation, that of Maslow (1962), suggests that until basic social needs for belonging are met, higher motives (e.g., for learning) will not be active. Similarly, Schutz (1966), writing about stages of group development, hypothesizes that issues of "inclusion" must be addressed before full attention can be devoted to the tasks at hand. Bakan's (1966) notion of agentic and communal goals also calls attention to the dual importance of these different motives.

Despite the psychological importance of the sense of belonging, most research on motivation in schools has focused on intrapsychic aspects of achievement motivation apart from other competing motives and in isolation from personal, social, and school contexts. Very recently, however, a number of studies have begun to explore social motives (e.g., Wentzel, 1989) and the perceived social context (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990) as important factors in understanding school motivation. In his 1990 AERA Invited Address reviewing the history of motivational research in education, Bernard Weiner concluded by stressing that

> motivational constructs such as "belongingness" must be brought into play when examining school motivation. This has been implicitly part of the trend toward cooperative learning, but it must be explicitly recognized and studied. In sum, school motivation cannot be divorced from the social fabric in which it is embedded (1990, p.621)

Belonging and Early Adolescence. Legitimate needs for interpersonal support and for a sense of belonging and valued participation in community are important motives throughout life, often stronger, in fact, than other motives. Maslow's theory (1962) suggests that the universal need for belonging functions as a deficiency motive, often preventing the pursuit of other goals until it is met. Students from grade school (Batcher, 1981; Zeichner, 1978) through college (Tinto, 1987) have difficulty sustaining academic engagement and commitment in environments in which they do not feel personally valued and welcome. Social motives are especially prominent in early adolescence when young people begin more seriously to consider who

they are and wish to be, with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their energies and stake their futures. Because this period involves exploring aspects of personal identity separate from parents and family, youth come to rely more heavily than before on friendships and other non-kin relationships for support and direction (Berndt, 1982; Cauce, 1989; Epstein & Karweit, 1983). Since for many students ordinary peer norms are anti-academic (Fordham, 1988), the clear sene of personal and social inclusion in groups which advance educational goals may be crucial as a counterbalance. Some research indicates that inclusion and support may have particular importance for minority (Steinberg, 1990) and female adolescents (Fine & Zane, 1989; Goodenow, 1990, Prose, 1990).

Unfortunately, schools themselves sometimes alienate, discourage, and fail students (Fine, 1986, 1990; Kagan, 1990; Tinto, 1987; Wehlage, 1989). Often the "fit" between the social, developmental, and educational needs of pre- and early adolescent students and the structure and culture of their schools and classes is poor (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The first and most prominent recommendation of Turning Points (1989), the recent Carnegie Council report on the education of young adolescents, was that schools and classes should be communities for learning, because "young adolescents need to see themselves as valued members of a group that offers mutual support and trusting relationships" (p. 33). Although several fascinating case studies (Lipsitz, 1984; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1990), have pointed to the pivotal impact of belonging, mutual support, and community, such constructs have received little empirical investigation within psychology.

What does "belonging" in an educational setting mean? Perceived friendliness from others and a sense of being personally valued are necessary, but not sufficient; belonging in a class must also include participation in the shared educational goals of the class. Wehlage's (1989) theory of "school membership" captures, at a school-wide level, what is meant when he asserts that "..more than simple technical enrollment...(school membership) means that students have established a social bond between themselves, the adults in the school, and the norms governing the institution" (p.10). Belonging or psychological membership can be seen, then, as involving not only social acceptance but also respect and acknowledged participation in a purposive group or community, and as involving supportive relationships with both fellow students and with teachers. While Wehlage discusses school membership, which may be a crucial determinant of continuing in school rather than dropping out, a sense of *classroom* membership may be necessary to promote participation and engagement in the hard and often frustrating academic work and the consequent educational achievement that are the main goals of schools.

Belonging or psychological membership can be distinguished from several other related constructs frequently used in educational or psychological research. Four of these are classroom climate, social competence, sociometric status and social support.

Class environment or class climate, like other organizational climate constructs, is a means of describing different social or psychological factors or dimensions seen by participants to be characteristic of a particular environment. Trickett and Moos' widely-used "Class Environment Scales" (1974), for example, contain subscales tapping students' perceptions of rule clarity, competitiveness, teacher support, affiliation, and other dimensions of a

school class. While some aspects of class climate, such as affiliation or support, are likely to be related to psychological membership or belonging, there are two key differences. First, climate measures are intended to create a 'profile' rather than a discrete score; such scales are useful for describing qualitative differences in environments rather than in individuals. More importantly, climate is a group-referenced rather than an individual or self-referenced construct: respondents are asked to judge the level of task orientation in general, for example, rather than to report on their own task focus in the setting. Although this may seem to be simply a slight difference in wording, the effect may be significant (Goodenow, 1991b). While a friendly, supportive climate will doubtlessly have fewer isolated or alienated members than an unfriendly one, climate measures may not be especially sensitive in picking up individual sense of belonging.

A second related construct is social competence, which can be conceived of as a set of interpersonal skills possessed by individuals, skills which develop over time and which can be taught or fostered by parents, teachers, and others interested in children's growth (van Lieshout, van Aken, & van Seyen, 1991). One widely used measure is Harter's (1982) Perceived Competence Scale for children, which includes a subscale tapping the child's sense of his or her own ability to make friends, get along with others, etc. Thought of in this way, perceived social competence is a dimension of self-concept. As Ford (1982) pointed out, however, social competence varies by situation: a highly competent individual in one situation or setting may be quite incompetent in another. Recently, Wentzel (1989, 1991) has studied the mix of social and academic goals in classrooms, and extent to which general classroom competence may require some distinctively social skills. How does social competence, then, differ from classroom belonging or psychological membership? Clearly, socially competent young people, those with good social skills, are far more likely than children with poor skills to (correctly) perceive themselves as belonging and as being liked, respected, and accepted in classes and in other social contexts. On the other hand, belonging is not only the result of skills, but is also the result of the fit between person and group. In some environments, some children will not feel accepted, and may not in fact be accepted, regardless of the levels of their "social competence," though the child with good social skills is certainly likely to fare better than others (Hirsch, Engel-Levy, DuBois, & Hardesty, 1990). Token members of any outgroup, for example, or people with any form of minority status vis-a-vis the general makeup of a class or other group, may not have full "membership" in the group. Unlike social competence, belonging focuses on the individual-in-context rather than on the individual's traits or skills alone, and as such, the concept of belonging may be a more useful one in examining the dual role of environment and the individual.

Third, belonging or psychological membership can be distinguished from sociometric status. Sociometric status is usually investigated by asking group members to nominate a finite number of others in the group as friends or favored work partners; status is then tabulated by counting the relative number of nominations received. One particularly interesting and promising variation of sociometric status for use in classrooms has Elizabeth Cohen's (1986) notion of "co-status", which combines students' ratings of liking another with ratings of the perceived academic competence of the other. While measures of status have several uses in understanding group life, by ranking individuals they obscure situations in which no one (or everyone) is liked or

accepted in a group. Further, because status measures are generally 'objective' in that ratings are made by others, they do not tap individual subjective reality. It is likely to be an individual's own perception of acceptance, belonging, and respect that influences situational motivation.

A fourth construct, perceived social support, is highly similar to belonging in some ways. Social support has received widespread research attention in recent years (e.g., Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990), and the social support literature calls attention to the importance of the individual's embeddedness in a welcoming social context as an important contributor to coping with difficulties of all sorts. On the other hand, most studies investigate support as an influence on physical or mental health rather than on generally academic or other task-related outcomes. What is needed is a way of looking at support that is both appropriate for young people and that is relevant to the specific dimensions and goals of classrooms and schools.

Perceived belonging in a class, then, is a situation-specific, individually and subjectively focused, "state" rather than "trait" construct. As such, it is assumed to be different in different groups and to be capable of changing over time. Belonging is clearly related to class climate, social competence, and sociometric status, though it is not identical to them; it may be thought of as a particular form of perceived social and academic support. The present study is a prospective investigation of psychological membership or sense of belonging among pre-adolescent and early adolescent middle school students. Specifically, the study examines the relationship of the sense of belonging to two motivation-related cognitions and to later measures of engagement and achievement.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures. Participants in the study were all of the students, 5th through 8th grade, in a suburban middle school. The school is located is a small (under twenty thousand people) formerly rural town turned suburb in the Northeast. Most families are middle-class, and parents tend to be employed as professionals or white collar employees in the area's high tech industries. The school, like the town, is almost entirely white; the 7% ethnic minority students in the school are predominantly Asian (Chinese, Korean, Indian, etc.) and from educated families. In all, 612 students are included in the sample, which is the entire school population with the exception of absentees and a few students whose parents did not wish them to participate or for whom data were inadequate or incomplete.

In October, not quite mid-way through the first academic quarter, students competed a questionnaire in their English classes. To preserve student anonymity while retaining the ability to link questionnaires to school records, students coded the questionnaires with their official school identifying number, used in keeping school records but unknown to the researcher. In late November, the end of the first quarter, official report card records, ID-coded but with names removed, were obtained from the school.

Overview. The basic focus of the questionnaire concerned students' ratings of (1) their self-efficacy or expectations of success in specific academic subjects, (2) their ratings of the intrinsic value, importance, and interest in those subjects to them, and (3) their ratings of their own sense of belonging, being

liked, accepted, and respected by both teacher and fellow students in those subject matter classes. Five different parallel versions of the questionnaire were prepared and distributed randomly. Each version targeted two of the five academic classes attended by all of the school's students (English, reading, social studies, science, and mathematics). Thus, one student might complete scales regarding self-efficacy, intrinsic value, and sense of membership in her mathematics and reading classes, while another student responded to scales concerning his science and English classes. This procedure insured that student responses would reflect attitudes toward more than one single academic subject class, and that all academic subjects would be represented, but that individual students would not be burdened with answering repetitive questions about all subjects. The questionnaire took about 35 minutes to complete.

Measures: *Belonging.* The primary construct of interest in this study, sense of belonging in school classes, was measured with the Psychological Sense of Membership - Class scale (PSoM-C), designed for use with pre-adolescent and adolescent students (Goodenow, 1990, 1991). The scale uses 5-point Likert statements, and includes items that reflect acceptance by both teachers ("My science teacher likes me") and fellow students ("It's hard for me to make friends with other students in this class" - reverse item), as well as some general items. Care was taken to tap academic support/respect ("My social studies teacher wants to know what I think about things," "Other students in my English class like to work with me"), as well as more purely personal or social acceptance. In the initial scale development, 28 items were tested; exploratory factor analysis revealed three major factors - peer acceptance, teacher acceptance, and general alienation/negativism. Significant correlations were found between PSoM-C and both teacher-rated classroom social standing and conceptually-related subscales from a widely-used class climate scale (Trickett & Moos, 1974), indicating good scale validity. For the present study, the scale was reduced to sixteen items by eliminating, within each factor group, items with low variability and low item-scale correlations. Internal consistency reliability for this shorter 16-item scale was demonstrated by a high Cronbach's alpha of .899.

Self-efficacy and Intrinsic Value. An expectancy x value approach to motivation was taken, one that assumed that motivation to pursue academic goals is associated with two sets of cognitions - those relating to self-perceived expectancies for success in reaching the goals and those associated with the value and importance attached to the goals. To measure these, Self-Efficacy and Intrinsic Value measures were 8-item scales drawn from Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) in their study of 7th grade science students. Items in the Self-Efficacy Scale were written in a way that conformed to Festinger's (1954) distinction between social and personal sources of self-evaluation: four items assessed doing well in comparison with others in the class, while four did not imply comparison with others. The Intrinsic Value scale included items refering to both the importance and the interest the academic class had for the student. Both scales employed a five-point Likert format ranging from "not at all true" to "completely true" and, as in the PSoM-C scale, items were written to specify a particular academic subject. In the present study, scale reliabilities were .87 for Self-Efficacy and .85 for Intrinsic Value, across students and school subjects.

Grades and Effort. Official student transcripts for the first school-year quarter were obtained, with ID coding but names removed. Teacher ratings of effort (high, medium and low) in every class were used as the best available measure of engagement. Official quarter grades, written as letter grades (C-, etc.) but later translated into numerical scores (72%, etc.), were used to assess academic achievement

RESULTS

Basic means are presented in Table 1, below, in which scores are averaged across school subjects. Several aspects of these results merit attention. First, as is evident from the table, all mean scores are in the upper ranges: on average, students' ratings of their sense of belonging, of their self-efficacy with regard to their schoolwork, and of the intrinsic value of the subjects they are studying are all well above the 3.00 scale midpoint which would have occurred by chance. Additionally, with a mean grade average of 88% and a modal effort score of 1 (high), it becomes clear that teachers as well as students believe that students are doing well.

TABLE 1: Means of Self-Report and School Record Variables, by Class

	PSoM	Efficacy	Value	GPA	Effort
5th Grade (n=139)	3.72	3.95	4.09[a]	90	1.29
6th Grade (n=165)	3.70	4.00	4.04	88	1.18
7th Grade (n=152)	3.84	4.05	3.82[b]	88	1.21
8th Grade (n=156)	3.90	4.02	3.83[b]	88	1.24
All students (612)	3.79*	4.01	3.94***	88*	1.24*.

* p <.05, significant grade-level differences
***p <.001, significant grade-level differences. Within the column, means with different superscripts are signficantly different.

Second, grade-level trends are evident. One-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine grade-level differences. Belonging rose with age. Although the Scheffe test did not reveal a significant difference between any two specific age/grade groups, the overall ANOVA was significant ($F=4.01, p < .01$), showing the highest sense of belonging occuring among students who had had more experience in the school. On the other hand, students' ratings of the intrinsic value and interest of their school learning dropped sharply and significantly from 5th to 7th grade and 8th grade ($F=4.80, p < .01$). No significant grade-level shifts occurred in self-efficacy.

Third, despite the overall positive ratings on all scales, sense of membership is significantly lower than either self-efficacy ($t=9.23, p < .001$) or intrinsic value ($t=5.24, p < .001$). That is, students were significantly less sure that they belonged and that teachers and fellow students accepted them than they were about the value of their schoolwork or about their own academic capabilities.

A detailed analysis of the scale found the lowest means generally among those items focusing on perceived academic support or respect (e.g., "Other students ask for my suggestions and ideas," x = 3.12) and the highest among those dealing with generally positive affect (e.g., "Students in this class are not very friendly," reversed x = 4.22).

Scale correlations. The major focus of this study was the relationship of psychological variables - belonging, efficacy, and intrinsic value - to academic outcomes. In the Table 2 below, grades and teacher-rated effort are matched with appropriate psychological scales, and correlations (averaged across school subjects) are presented. For every student, grades and effort scores were available for five school subjects and scale ratings were available for two school subjects. It was thus possible to compute average across-school-subject intercorrelations, presented in brackets on the diagonal below.

Table 2: Correlations between Student Scales, Grades, and Effort

	PSoM	Efficacy	Value	Grade	Effort
PSoM	[.742]				
Efficacy	.621	[.477]			
Intrinsic Value	.494	.612	[.423]		
Grade Report	.248	.358	.259	[.471]	
Effort Rating	.244	.272	.210	.495	[.385]

All correlations above are significant at the p.< .001 level.

Several aspects of Table 2 are notable. The correlations between the two teacher-reported measures and between the three student-reported measures are higher than those between report cards and self-reports, an effect attributable not only to the difference in raters (teacher versus student) but to the six-week difference in time. Intercorrelations among the attitudinal/psychological measures in the study are quite substantial, with belonging, as measured by PSoM, accounting for over 38% of the variance (r-squared) in self-efficacy (and the reverse), and almost a quarter (r^2 = .244) of the variance in intrinsic value.

All three psychological scales were significantly associated with grades and effort, assessed six weeks later. The expectancy measure, self-efficacy, being the single largest correlate of both. PSoM was more highly associated with effort than was intrinsic value, while the reverse was true for grade reports.

Same-measure correlations, presented in brackets on the diagonal, were obtained by correlating psychological measures about the first school subject discussed with those tapping attitudes toward the second subject. As is

evident above, PSoM scales were more highly correlated that was true for the other measures. This could be expected because many of the same fellow students (and in the case of 5th graders sometimes the same teachers) were in both academic classes. Despite the overlapping nature of the classroom social groups, belonging in one academic class accounted for just slightly over half (r^2 = .551) of the variance in belonging in the other class.

Additional analyses examined the relationship of PSoM to grades and effort in different academic subject areas, and found correlations to be highest for social studies classes (.342 for grades, 3.08 for effort) and lowest for mathematics (.178 and .189, respectively) and reading (.196, 190), the only two academic subjects which were homogeneously grouped by ability in the school. ANOVAs examining PSoM differences between students of different reading-level (as indicated by their class placement), found that low-ability students were just as likely to report a sense of belonging as other students when the class being discussed was reading or mathematics, but indicated lower self-report belonging in (heterogeneous) science, social studies, and English classes.

Stepwise multiple regression procedures were derived using the student attitude scales to predict grades and effort for each of the academic subjects. With quarter grades as the criterion variable, self-efficacy was the only significant predictor for four of the five subjects; for intrinsic value was the sole attitudinal predictor of the mathematics grade. With effort as criterion, only self-efficacy predicted ratings in English and social studies classes, intrinsic value alone predicted math and science class effort ratings, and PSoM was the only significant predictor in reading class.

Finally, the association between the sense of belonging and the other study measures was examined as it varied across grade level. For each age/grade, correlations between PSoM and other measures were averaged for all academic subjects and are reported below in Table 3.

TABLE 3: PSoM Correlations across Age/Grade

PSoM Score	Efficacy	Value	Grade	Effort
5th Grade	.662	.461	.190	.229
6th Grade	.569	.418	.257	.272
7th Grade	.607	.552	.298	.296
8th Grade	.664	.602	.290	.221

While conclusions about these correlations must be tentative, since correlation coefficients within a single grade level often varied widely depending on the academic subject being considered, several trends can be noted. First, the relationship between belonging and the interest and value students attribute to their classes rises from the two younger grades to 7th and 8th grades. Second, both outcome measures, course grades and teacher-rated effort, are more closely associated with the sense of belonging in the 7th grade than in the earlier years, though this association drops off somewhat by 8th grade. Taken together, these correlations suggest that the importance of belonging

may be especially salient just as young people move from pre-adolescent childhood into early adolescence proper.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest the potential importance of the construct of belonging or psychological membership for pre-adolescent and early adolescent students in schools. Further, the results suggest several policy implications for both classroom practice and for educational research. Theoretically, these results suggest that an approach to the study of motivation and classroom engagement that takes social goals, motives, and contexts into account is a valuable addition to more purely individual and cognitive approaches.

Psychological membership in school classes can be conceptualized as involving the perception of socially and academically supportive relationships with both teachers and with other students, relationships in which respect, encouragement, and acceptance are hallmarks. Though membership may have some trait-like aspects in that it generalizes across classrooms, it is different enough in different classrooms to be seen as situation-specific. Such psychological membership is significantly related to cognitive aspects of motivation, and prospectively to academic engagement (as represented by classroom effort) and subsequent academic achievement. Further, in general such belonging can be seen as having a greater impact on classroom effort than even the intrinsic value and interest that students hold for their academic subjects.

Belonging appears to be more significantly associated with educational outcomes in some school contexts than in others. Specifically, the association between belonging is higher for some academic subject classes, for example low-consensus subjects such as social studies which require participation in open discussion and may emphasize students' ability to interact easily with others. Though still significantly related to motivation and to achievement, belonging is apparently less salient in high-consensus subjects such as mathematics and in classes which have been previously grouped to insure student homogeneity. Rather than providing support for ability-grouping practices, however, the results presented here suggest the importance in mixed classes of the teacher's taking pains to implement classroom practices that will insure an adequate sense of psychological membership on the part of all students, especially those perceived as "low ability". Cooperative learning practices (Johnson & Johnson, 199; Slavin, 1990), specifically teaching discussion and interaction skills, emphasizing respect between students, and even occasionally deliberately altering the "natural" status structure of the class by assigning special roles to low-status, low-belonging students (Cohen, 1986) are but a few examples of such practices.

A second context, that of age, also appears to moderate the importance of belonging to school motivation and achievement. The results taken together suggest that 7th grade students, who for the most part are 12-year-olds just in the process of moving out of childhood and into adolescence, may be especially vulnerable when their sense of belonging is upset or absent. These results are consistent with those reported in other studies (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1989) which have found this to be an especially difficult age to for students, one in which school transitions (for example, from an elementary

school to a junior high school) can be potentially catastrophic. While the importance of belonging may be especially strong among 7th grade students, a consistent stable environment (as was the case here in a 5th through 8th grade middle school) need not result in lowered sense of belonging.

Finally, it should be noted that the students participating in the present study were largely middle-class students attending a highly supportive and encouraging school in a generally stable small town. In fact, the general favorability of the school, as evidenced by high scores on all study measures, may have contributed to a "ceiling effect" for the influence of belonging on motivation and achievement. In future work, it will be important to examine classroom and school psychological membership in contexts in which (and with students for whom) a basically high level of belonging cannot be assumed - in urban classrooms, in schools with largely transient populations, and among students for whom the norms of educational institutions are dissimilar from those they experience at home. There is ample evidence that belonging among such students may influence not only levels of academic achievement but even staying in school althogether. While further research is needed to tease out and replicate the results presented here, a focus on the individual student's relationship to the social context, rather than simply on intrapsychic aspects of the individual alone, may prove valuable in understanding and shaping educational processes.

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